

When breath becomes air

Paul Kalanithi

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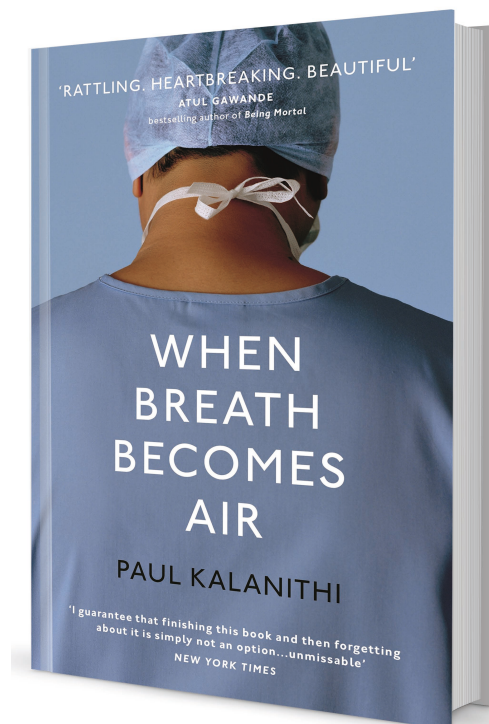
When Breath Becomes Air is the poignant yet poetic memoir of neurosurgeon-neuroscientist, Paul Kalanithi, who was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer at the age of 36. During this dialogue with Kalanithi, he recounts his time as an undergraduate completing a master's degree in English literature, his time as a medical student, and his transition into the unrelenting world of neurosurgical residency.

A polymath with a relentless passion for learning, Kalanithi achieved a B.A. and an M.A. in English literature at Stanford, a Master's in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, and attained his medical degree at the Yale School of Medicine, graduating cum laude in 2007. Fascinated by life's meaning and finitude, he described his pursuit of medicine as one to "bear witness to the twinned mysteries of death", he chose to further this understanding with a residency in neurosurgery, as the craft that dealt with life, death and meaning. It was during the final stages of his residency that Kalanithi developed a constellation of symptoms which ultimately resulted in a diagnosis of stage IV metastatic lung cancer:

Aptly named, after the poem "Caelica 83" by Baron Brooke Fulke Greville, Kalanithi's passion for English literature is prevalent, woven into his eclectic prose, as he recounts anecdotes from his years as a resident, revisiting times of bitterness and regret, times of success and times of reflection. His search is deep and unrelenting for explanation to his failures, and furthering his understanding of mortality.

Through his journey with illness, Kalanithi shares his deeply personal insights. Flipping through his own CT scan, wearing a patient's gown rather than his familiar scrubs, the tale of this doctor-turned patient will arouse an emotional response. The contrast between authoritative surgeon and meek patient reminding us that although as doctors and medical students we frequently bear witness to death, to truly understand its peculiarity, one must confront it on a personal level. Kalanithi excels here in narrating his own physical decline, while shedding light on the various ailments he accumulates. The weight of his story will be sure to linger for time to come, and underpin our understanding of mortality and what it means to be a patient.

Kalanithi wrote with difficulty as his health deteriorated, but he was determined to complete his memoir, and to understand what it all really means, what makes life truly worth living? The culmination of many years spent striving, short-circuited in an instant, the future he imagined vanished, he commences on a journey to learn how to live life outside the operating room. Early on in his illness, Kalanithi obsesses over statistics and Kaplan-Meier survival curves, while useful to the physician, he soon realises what little relevance these bear to patients. "What patients seek is not scientific knowledge that doctors hide but existential authenticity each person must find on her own... The angst of facing mortality has no remedy in probability". With this revelation, he shies away from medical



science, and finds himself resorting to literature to find the answers to the metaphysical and existential questions he seeks.

Perhaps one of the most unsettling realisations of this memoir, is how often in medicine we are obsessed with delayed gratification. Seldom is one mindful of their present standpoint, rather focusing on what's next, where will I be in five years, ten years? This astute yet disconcerting realisation, arouses an appreciation for the day to day experiences, and the vast privileges we have in this role. Such insights are riddled throughout.

Ultimately, it is with his startling prose, that Kalanithi recounts a tale, not of struggle but one of triumph and fortitude, as a man so fascinated by death, so well acquainted with it, confronts his own mortality. After many hours, days and years spent in the OR trying to hone his craft, trying to perfect his talent, trying to further his understanding of human existence, he culminates with the insight that one "can't ever reach perfection, but you can believe in an asymptote toward which you are ceaselessly striving". Kalanithi died on Monday, March 9, 2015, surrounded by his family.

When Breath Becomes Air is a heartfelt autobiography, a personal dialogue, an insight into medicine, life and death, and a message to a new-born daughter: It is on these fronts that it not only succeeds, but excels. This one is simply not to be missed.